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ABSTRACT

Although termination of longterm therapy has been regarded as a loss experience, termination of counseling is viewed primarily in terms of goal attainment. Little is known about how counselors handle termination and how clients react to the experience. To explore clients' experiences of, and reactions to, termination of counseling, and to determine what behaviors actually occur during the termination phase, 68 former clients at a university counseling center completed the Termination Behaviors Checklist and the Multiple Affective Attitude Checklist. Clients were also asked how important the termination process was to them. A number of termination behaviors were identified, i.e., assessing goal attainment and sharing feelings. Results also indicated clients' most frequently reported affective responses were positive, contrary to the emphasis in termination literature on negative reactions. Most clients in this sample reported that it was important to them to discuss termination with their counselor and that they were satisfied with the termination process. The findings suggest that a better understanding of the termination process can make it a more meaningful experience for both client and counselor. (JAC)

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AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF TERMINATION OF INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING

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AN EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION OF TERMINATION OF INDIVIDUAL COUNSELING

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When I was in my beginning practicum classes, I was often baffled as to how to end my work with clients. Although I had been told that termination was important, I was never told how to conduct those last sessions. And, honestly, sometimes termination did not feel very important -- to me or to the client. I kept wondering what I was doing wrong, when termination did not feel important. Despite my searchings through the termination literature, I still have not found an answer to my questions about terminations that are not important. So out of this preoccupation with my feared inadequacies, I decided to search for some answers myself -- hence this research.

Although termination of psychoanalysis and longterm therapy has been regarded as a loss experience, termination of counseling is viewed primarily in terms of goal attainment (Hanfmann, 1978), with less attention paid to the unique behavioral and affective aspects of this final phase of treatment. Although termination is considered important, little is known about how counselors handle termination and how clients react to the phenomenological experience of termination. This paper presents an exploratory investigation of clients' experiences of, and reactions to, termination. I will report some preliminary findings that respond to the following research questions:

1. What behaviors occur during the termination phase of counseling?

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2. How do clients describe their affective reactions to termination?
3. Do clients think it is important for them to discuss termination with their counselors?
4. How satisfied are clients with their termination?

This study was conducted at a large, urban university in the South East, during the spring of 1982. Subjects were 68 former counseling center clients, all of whom had ended treatment that spring and received at least two sessions of individual, time unlimited, personal counseling. They had been seen either at the main counseling center on the academic campus or at a satellite center on the medical campus. The sample included 70% females and 30% males, was predominantly white (79%), with an average age of 24 (s=4.89). Subjects were a bit older than the traditional college counseling center population, but were not atypical for this University. They received an average of ten sessions of individual counseling (s=8.12) and were seen by either senior staff or graduate student trainees. Termination in this study was defined rather loosely, as the end of the formal client-counselor treatment relationship, whether the end was initiated because treatment was complete or because the client dropped out of counseling.

After finishing counseling, subjects were contacted by telephone and invited to participate in the study. About a month after termination, they came to the counseling center and filled out three brief questionnaires, which took fifteen minutes. About one third of those contacted were unwilling to come back to the center, so they participated in the study by mail. Sixty-eight of ninety clients originally contacted agreed to participate, yielding a 78% response rate.

Responses to the first research question, what occurs during termination, comes from the Termination Behaviors Checklist. This is a self-report measure, completed by clients, which I developed to describe counselor and client behaviors occuring during the termination phase of treatment. Termination behaviors checked by at least half of the sample included the following: client thanking the counselor, summarizing the work, setting a date for the final session, counselor inviting the client to return to the agency, discussing client's plans for the future, and hugging or shaking hands. "Assessing client's goal attainment" was checked as often as was "client and counselor sharing their feelings about ending." This suggests that the affective component to termination is attended to as often as is the goal attainment aspect. Related to Terri Thames' study, just less than half of these subjects reported that client and counselor related more as equals toward the end of counseling than they had at earlier times.

To determine clients' feelings about termination, the second area investigated, a revised version of Zuckerman & Lubin's Multiple Affective Adjective Checklist was used, on which clients were asked to check adjectives that described their feelings about termination. Adjectives checked by at least half the subjects included "agreeable", "thoughtful", "friendly", "calm", "cooperative", "good", "alive" and "healthy". According to Zuckerman and Lubin's classification, all of these adjectives denote positive feelings. Adjectives denoting negative affect about termination, such as "angry", "afraid", "nervous", "rejected" and "sad", were checked by one third or less of the subjects. The fact that positive adjectives were endorsed more often than negative ones is contradictory

to the literature's emphasis on the negative, painful reactions to termination.

There could be several explanations for this. Although most of the termination literature draws from the psychoanalytic tradition, termination of counseling may differ from termination of analysis, resulting in different kinds of affective responses. Another explanation of this discrepancy could be the source of the report of affect. This study utilized client self-report, whereas most termination literature consists of therapist report. Negative feelings about termination, such as anger and rejection, could be repressed by clients but apparent to counselors. Conversely, counselors' countertransference reactions to termination may involve negative emotions, such as guilt and anger, which they may project, inappropriately, onto clients. A final explanation, suggested to me by Jean Carter, focuses on the timing of measurement. Perhaps if subjects had responded to these measures immediately after termination they would have reported more negative affect, but because measurement occured a month later, they reported positive affect. Whatever the reason, it is apparent that clients most frequently reported positive feelings about termination.

The third area this study examined was clients' views of the importance of termination. Clients responded to the question "How important was it for you to discuss your reactions to ending with your counselor?" using a five point Likert scale. Three quarters of the clients said it was important or very important to discuss termination with their counselors. This confirms the literature's emphasis on the importance of termination, in counseling as well as in psychoanalysis.

A smaller group of subjects reported that discussing termination was not important to them. I wondered how these subjects compared to those

who felt discussing termination was important. Interestingly, they received about the same number of counseling sessions as did other clients, ruling out the explanation that termination was unimportant because of a lesser time investment. As the literature on time-limited therapy demonstrates, termination of even brief therapy is important. Subjects who thought termination was unimportant tended to be less satisfied with the results of their counseling and they checked fewer items on the Termination Behaviors Checklist. A disproportionately large number of these clients were seen by male counselors, and a disproportionately large number were students seen at the Counseling Center's medical campus office. Students' expectations of counseling may partially explain the lack of importance they attribute to termination. Clients who come to the counseling center's office on the medical campus view counseling less in terms of a process or relationship and more in terms of problem solving. Once their problem is solved, they terminate -- much in the same way as a person would respond to receiving a prescription from a physician. The differences between subjects who thought termination was important and those who thought it was unimportant are not yet clear, however expectations of counseling may be one important moderator variable.

The final research question asked about clients' satisfaction with termination. Again, clients responded to a single, five-point Likert item. Two thirds of the subjects reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their terminations.

The small number of clients who were not satisfied with their terminations received fewer counseling sessions, checked fewer items of the Termination Behaviors Checklist, and, as a group, rated termination as very important. The fewer checks on the Termination Behaviors Checklist

suggests that counselors may have focused less on termination than these clients would have liked, although counselors reported that they dealt with termination no less with dissatisfied clients than with satisfied clients. Lastly, more of these dissatisfied clients were seen by male than by female counselors. Although it is difficult to make attributions about this, it would fit traditional sex role stereotypes that termination from male counselors would be different, and perhaps processed less, than would be termination from female counselors.

To summarize, this study investigated termination of individual counseling in a university counseling center and clients' responses to termination. A number of frequent termination behaviors were identified. Clients' most frequently reported affective responses to termination were positive, contrary to the emphasis in the termination literature on negative reactions. In this sample, most clients reported that it was important for them to discuss termination with their counselors, and that they were satisfied with their terminations.

As I mentioned, the findings I've reported here are only part of the study I have conducted. I will also be looking at variables that moderate clients' reactions to termination, such as clients' loss histories and developmental states, and counselors' sex and theoretical orientations. I will try to further tease out what contributes to a satisfying or unsatisfying termination, and what makes termination more important to some clients than to others. Although this study was exploratory and the findings will need replication, I believe these results will help us make some order out of the chaos we find in the termination literature. This will enable us to better understand the termination process and make it a more meaningful experience for our clients and for ourselves as counselors.

REFERENCE

Hanfmann, E. Effective therapy for college students. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1978.